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Dreams of Lost Time

A Study of Cinephilia and Time Realism in Bertolucci's THE DREAMERS

Sutanya Singkhra

What do people do for love? Just about anything. And we all know how easy it is to fall in love. It is probably because of the mysterious nature of an act of love that makes it somehow irresistible. This is why using a phrase as clichéd as “falling in love with love” is not so inappropriate when we talk about “cinephilia” as a love for cinema. But truly, for us cinephiles, love for the cinema is not just an act of watching movies, but rather of *living* them, re-enacting particular scenes or lines that have changed forever our view of everything in our lives.

Many have tried to define and explain the phenomenon of cinephilia, the “crazy, obsessive” love for 24 frames-per-second of truth on screen.¹ What power does cinema possess, what has it gained, and from where? Its unique mechanism of making a series of still images *appear* in real action/real time is one thing. But the more obvious nature of cinema that we find so mesmerizing is its endless abilities to tell stories within affordable and possible “time frames” for the audience. This transforming power of cinema that perfectly instantiates the mysteries of time – *chronos*, *kairos*, *aion*² – is exactly the magic of cinema, the power that attracts, entertains and encourages the cinephilia.

Cinema does not only store time’s physicality, if it has one (though many have argued that time can in no way be retrieved – Bergson with his theory of time as *durée* comes to mind). For the first time in history it also makes the *flow* of time visible, readable, and compatible with the temporal accessibility of human psyche. None of the previous time-storage media – literature, paintings, sculptures, photographs – possesses this ability, this power to visually regain and represent the “passage” of “lost” time in the way that the human mind manages temporality, if we follow Freud, according to whom the psyche reads time as fragments, opposing itself to the relentlessness of time’s flow. For Freud, time itself is a violent force, and the mode of temporal discontinuity is the psyche’s own protective configurative.

In our contemporary media context, however, the scheme of time lost and regained in cinema has gone beyond the mere matter of recording and representing time (in both the factual and fictional sense). Today’s films, so often the products of cinephiles, have become obsessed with the concept of recapturing lost time, an attempt that may easily be read as a reflection on cinema itself. One can see it as a particular drama of “perfect moments” lost and regained through

re-enactments, repetitions; the result of the cinephilia complex, reflecting on itself in the medium of time.

Bernardo Bertolucci's *THE DREAMERS* (Italy/France/UK/USA: 2003) seems to be the perfect film to respond to this complex – a cinephilia project par excellence. The story is set in Paris against the backdrop of the May '68 student riots. Matthew (Michael Pitt), a young American, meets French twins Théo (Louis Garrel) and Isabelle (Eva Green) at the Cinémathèque Française during a demonstration against the sacking of its co-founder, Henri Langlois. The three quickly grow close, and once the twins' parents leave town Matthew is invited to live in their bourgeois apartment. There the three friends begin a life of reclusive bohemia, dismissing the boiling turmoil in the streets of Paris.

After being shown at the Venice Film Festival in 2003, *THE DREAMERS* came to us with a "faint whiff of scandal." Not only for its outrageous rating of NC-17 due to its extremely explicit sexual content, but also its controversial political context. *THE DREAMERS*, based on the novel *The Holy Innocents: A Romance* by Gilbert Adair,³ who also wrote the script for the film, reminisces, or, more precisely, re-enacts the spirits of the era. Bertolucci refers to the Paris of 1968 as a "very magical and intense period,"⁴ an era of "revolution" for young people, including him, as a film lover and filmmaker. *THE DREAMERS* is, therefore, simply a cinephilia project that Bertolucci uses to revive those glorious moments, a dream to trace back and once again experience that "lost" time.

The critics, those who praise and those who damn the film, all raise the issue of the truthfulness not of the events but of the nostalgia that Bertolucci's film enacts. On the one hand, they argue that "lost time" is successfully retrieved by the film's superb visual style and subtle narrative. But on the other hand, the incidents and scenes depicted – which one could call "cinematic time organizers" – are attacked for producing false, artificial, and pretentious reminiscences.⁵ However, if we are to consider this film as a project of and about cinephilia, and not a documentary of historical moments, to explore its nostalgia in *factual* terms would in any case be besides the point. Instead, we should read Bertolucci's *THE DREAMERS* as a search for the micro-moments and temporal orders that he has developed to sustain and embody these several layers of "lost" time.

Time in *THE DREAMERS*, then can be considered "cinephilia time," for it is a recapturing of key moments from that first generation of cinephiles (in the 1960s) and everything in relation to it. Along with the archival news footage of the student uprising and a re-enactment of some of the major events, the realism of that lost time is nested, and although it is not truthful to the event's conceptual sense, it is to its chrono-topical one. What is more, to invoke the impossible, Bertolucci has gone to the extent of transferring this lost time of youth, revolution, and the love of cinema simultaneously from the past (1968 – cinematic

time) to the present (filming time 2003 – cinephilia time) and back again, by having the key witnesses of that very event, actors Jean-Pierre Léaud and Jean-Pierre Kalfon, read aloud the same petition they read 35 years earlier.

The isomorphism of cinematic time and cinephilia time in these scenes is evidence of how Bertolucci sees the magic of cinema in retrieving and forming time as a root of the culture of cinephilia. He once wrote: “There are two things I love about the cinema: time and light. The whole *Life of* [Mizoguchi’s] *Lady O’Haru* – youth, maturity and old age, in 3,000 metres.... The unity of time in [John] Ford’s *Seven Women*: one or two days, as in tragedy. The a-temporal time in the films of Godard.”⁶ Bertolucci, as a child of the cinema, is mesmerized by cinema’s unique ability to weave time and portray it in a nutshell – the cinematic techniques of storytelling as time manipulation. The narrative devices he has chosen to regain lost time in *THE DREAMERS* can be simply categorized by the three major themes of the period of 1968: politics, love of cinema, and sexuality, the subjects which can be explored through specific spaces in the film respectively: the City, the Cinema, and the Body.

The City and Politics

Kevin Lynch, one of the most important figures in contemporary urban studies, compares the City to an artwork. He writes: “Looking at cities can give a special pleasure, however commonplace the sight may be.... At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequences of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.” The City, therefore is, as Lynch describes it, “a temporal art.”⁷ Without the passage of time, the city would signify nothing but built space.

In *THE DREAMERS*, the city of Paris is approached as a piece of temporal art. Bertolucci frames the city with a specific scale of time – the spring of 1968. Within this temporal frame, Paris comes to life, attains its own spirit. What then is this spirit of Paris in 1968? In general, people link the generation with sex, drugs, and rock and roll; a group of young people who live in a dream world, idealizing freedom, denying reality. But Bertolucci, who was in Paris at the time,⁸ strongly disagrees: “I don’t think that [sex, drugs, music] was freedom, to want to be free. I think in that very moment, politics was a big part of that.” He says, “Sex was together, in sync with politics, music, cinema. Everything was conjugated together.... It was a great privilege to be able to live in that moment... to be a part of big ambitious dreams: to want to change the world.”⁹ In other words, Bertolucci believes that this “big ambitious dream” is in fact the

true spirit of 1968 Paris, and not as one critic has put it: "In *THE DREAMERS*, to be a May '68 revolutionary is a lifestyle issue."¹⁰

This dream is explored in *THE DREAMERS* along with one of the film's major themes – politics. Throughout the film, even though 80 percent of the story takes place inside the French twins' apartment, Paris is preparing for something. The young people are preparing for a "revolution," which the film redepicts at the very end. And even though historians consider this student uprising against the government to have been a failure,¹¹ Bertolucci begs to differ, "people who say '68 was a failure are very unfair, a historical mistake. '68 was a revolution, not in political terms, but a change that was terribly important."¹²

With such a strong emotional connection with the time and place, *THE DREAMERS* can therefore be seen as the "light" that Bertolucci is always in search of as a filmmaker: "There is a light in *La règle du jeu* that announces the beginning of the war; there is a light in *Voyage to Italy* that announces Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, and with that, all of modern cinema; and a light in *Breathless* that announces the 60s."¹³ Even though the riot the film portrays in the end resulted in a defeat, the "dream" of the generation, the spirit of the city at the time, is in fact a "light" that, for Bertolucci, announces a true revolution to come. As he points out: "What remains of '68? I think people, the relationships between people are very different after '68. Life before '68 was a number of authoritarian figures. Then they disappeared. And the relationship between men and women, '68 triggered something, the women's liberation movement."¹⁴

We can see this "light" in *THE DREAMERS* through how the city of Paris itself is approached. The first shot we see is Paris in the springtime, bathed with sunlight. Matthew, a young American, absorbs the city with wistful eyes. Here it should be pointed out that the political angle of the film is conveyed through the eye of an outsider, an American student in Paris, and of course, an Italian filmmaker who has lived those lost moments. This point also stresses the fact that the realism woven into the film is in fact the "impression" of the time.

Through the eyes of the filmmaker, the impression of the era effects how time is treated in *THE DREAMERS* as well. Time in Paris – in the city streets – is treated as Bergson's *durée*. It is a flow that cannot and will not be stopped. In this sense, time in Paris is fact, is *reality*, that which, as Phillip K. Dick observes, even "when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."¹⁵

The Cinema and Love for Cinema

Bertolucci, as a cinephile, or, in the 1960s lingo, a film buff, was intimately affected by the government dismissal of Henri Langlois, a man who gave birth to

the Cinémathèque Française, a temple for film critics and filmmakers whose work still plays a significant role in the world of cinema today. The student demonstrations in front of the Cinémathèque at the beginning of the film depicts what Bertolucci regards as the 1960s spirit: "In '68 everything started with the Cinémathèque. ... All the ambitions and the thoughts were very connected with cinema. It was like a projection of illusions that have a cinematic value."¹⁶

And as a cinephilia project par excellence, *THE DREAMERS* uses movie-going in order to evoke the period. Bertolucci alludes to several groundbreaking films that help revive the elegance of the time. Thus, he has Matthew, Théo, and Isabelle act out passages from the films they have watched, and then marries the scenes with the shots of the films themselves. These include classics such as *QUEEN CHRISTINA* (USA: Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) and *BLONDE VENUS* (USA: Josef von Sternberg, 1932), and *Cahiers du cinéma* favourites like *SHOCK CORRIDOR* (USA: Samuel Fuller, 1963) and *MOUCHETTE* (France: Robert Bresson, 1967). One of the major moments in the film, of course, is the scene where the three main characters deliberately re-enact (and try to beat) the record run through Musée du Louvre by the three protagonists of Godard's *BANDE À PART* (France: 1964). These clips, nested alongside and inside the lives of the characters, only emphasize once again the concept of "cinema is life, and life cinema," showing that "cinephilia time" is not only the wish to *live* the experience of cinema, but to also *prolong* it beyond cinema, into life.

By the 1960s, the cinema had become more than just "truth" on the screen. At one point in the film, Isabelle imitates Jean Seberg from Godard's *BREATHLESS* (France: 1959), one of the founding moments of the New Wave: "I entered this world on the Champs-Élysées in 1959, and do you know what my very first words were? 'New York Herald Tribune! New York Herald Tribune!'" It is not her parents who gave birth to Isabelle, but New Wave Cinema. And at that moment, the concept works both ways. New Wave Cinema was actually born to young people like Isabelle, Théo, and Matthew. For the first time in history, cinema was being made by young directors such as Louis Malle, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol, who started as film lovers, became critics, and turned their critical love or loving criticism into movies. This movement we know as the French New Wave or Nouvelle Vague, is in fact another "revolution" *THE DREAMERS* tries to depict. While there was a "revolution" in the streets of Paris, there was also one in the movie theatres. The arrival of the New Wave changed filmmaking forever. New visual styles, themes, and modes of production were introduced to the world.¹⁷ The novelty and innovations in the form of New Wave films not only brought jump cuts or hand-held camera work; they reflected the spirit of the time in other ways, too – dreaming a dream of sovereignty, in the political sense as well. As Françoise Brion writes in *La nouvelle vague*, "The New Wave was a freedom of expression, a new fash-

ion of acting, and a great reform on the level of make-up.... Suddenly, you saw actors who looked natural, like they had just gotten out of bed."¹⁸ Here the concept of time in relation to the cinema is given another dimension in that it documents the lived time of its protagonists, as a literal "awakening."

The Body and Sexuality

A trademark of Bertolucci's films is explicit sexual content and nudity. Internationally, he became famous with *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* (Italy/France: Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), one of the first films to show intercourse on screen in European art cinema. Picking up on this earlier work, also set in Paris, *THE DREAMERS* contains full frontal nudity and graphic scenes of sexual intercourse. However, in contrast to the sexual content in *LAST TANGO IN PARIS*, which Bertolucci refers to as "something dark, heavy, and tragic," the eroticism and sexuality in *THE DREAMERS* is "something very light, very joyous."¹⁹ Given some of the more brooding moments of sexual tension in the film, one may disagree with Bertolucci on this, but one can also put the emphasis in the remark on light as opposed to dark, rather than as opposed to heavy.

The concept of "light," which, as previously indicated, always receives special attention in Bertolucci films, here subtly interplays with the exposure of the youthful bodies. In *THE DREAMERS* "light" should be seen as intertwined with the spirit of dawn and waking up, that is, with the "big ambitious dream" of freedom. The sexual experimentations the three characters perform thus suggest that very dream, by testing the limits of freedom, enacted in the "light" of each other's constant presence. The issues of sexual relationships from heterosexuality, homosexuality, to incest the film deals with function as a step toward the "revolution" which was taking place outside. As Roger Ebert commented, "within the apartment, sex becomes the proving ground and then the battleground for the revolutionary ideas in the air."²⁰ The glow and radiance of the era, is reflected in the way Bertolucci depicts the protagonists' naked bodies of the three protagonists under warm but intense lights.

Thus, the portrayal of naked bodies in *THE DREAMERS* serves not as (censorable) representations of nudity, but as an index of a sovereign space, like the city and the cinema, that preserves lost time, the lost dream of the era. However, with the young bodies constantly being exposed, the concept of time as a chronological flow or *kairos* (moving towards the single event) is also challenged. Time in the elegant apartment, which is the setting for more than half of the film, seems to stop, or at least be suspended. Matthew, Théo, and Isabelle are the "dreamers" who lock themselves in "the marvelous dream,"²¹ enacting their

ideals about life, art, music, cinema, and even politics. The concept of dream here brings us back to Freud's theory of the unconscious, the psychological virtual space where dreams reside.²² We know that Bertolucci has always been an avid reader of Freud, and so the Oedipus complex plays an especially important role in his films – e.g., *PRIMA DELLA RIVOLUZIONE* (Italy: 1964) or *THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM* (Italy: 1970). As Robert Phillip Kolker suggests, all his work deals with some aspect of this conflict: "the problems of sexual relationships, for the struggle of children and parents, of generations."²³ In *THE DREAMERS*, however, Oedipus is less present, and instead, it is Freud's view of the unconscious, and in particular, the idea that time does not exist in the unconscious, that Bertolucci draws on.

In *THE DREAMERS*, the "dream" the three characters are living in the apartment seems to never end. The three hardly leave the place, or when they do they always rush right back. For there, in the "dream," they are safe from the destructive nature of time. The exposure of their bodies emphasizes the concept of *eternal* youth. This concept of timelessness is captured by the photographic and painterly *mise en scène* of the film. Like time in photographs and paintings, time in the apartment, which engulfs the bodies of the three protagonists is stopped. Bertolucci is known for his use of sculptures and paintings as models for the visual construction of his films,²⁴ and this influence is evident in *THE DREAMERS*. Bertolucci makes the sculpture of Venus de Milo come to life with Isabelle's body, and recaptures Francis Bacon's famous triptychs with the bodies of the three, resting together in a bathtub with their reflections on the three-way mirrors.

The film's painterly *mise en scène* here also reflects the spirit of the 1960s in terms of the cross-cultural exchanges that have, in much of the 20th century, brought Paris and New York into close proximity with each other, if we think of all the French artists who moved between the two capitals, and the many expatriate Americans who came to make Paris their home. This history, already revived by the French cinephiles' love of the American cinema, is further re-enacted and prolonged in the figure of Matthew, the young American. His role reminds one of the Americans – young idealists, at once naïve and pragmatic – that people the novels of Henry James. As Ebert suggests, the film forces Matthew to confront these strange Europeans, Théo and Isabelle, in the same way Henry James "sacrifices his Yankee innocents on the altar of continental decadence."²⁵ All three, as children of the 1960s, possess the idealism of the period, only Matthew, as an outsider, approaches the ideals with a slightly stronger sensibility, and a different sense of reality. The French twins, on the other hand, are entirely drowned in their own idealism, to the degree that it turns into narcissism. The physical nature of twins makes them inseparable. In the case of Théo and Isabelle, however, they are emotionally inseparable as well.

They do everything together, including sleeping naked in the same bed and bathing in the same bathtub. Matthew at one point can no longer stand their childish self-immersion: "I wish you could step out of yourselves and just look. ... I look at you, and I listen to you and I think... you're never gonna grow... Not as long as you keep clinging to each other the way that you do."

The controversial conclusion of *THE DREAMERS* brings us back to the concept of time. Time, like reality, never goes away. While the three kids are exploring each other in the apartment, where time is no more, the explosions and riots in the streets are occurring. As Bertolucci clarifies, "history is calling them."²⁶ Here the film's factual, chronological time catches up and unites with the fictional, *aionic* time. But at another level, that of our cinephilia-nostalgia time, it is we the spectators who have to weave together the "intervals," the "fragments" of lost time that Bertolucci presents us with. They constitute the film's realism, at both the memory and the narrative level, not their truth as history.

Conclusion

Considered as a film about "time realism" (in contrast to, say action or representational realism) Bertolucci's *THE DREAMERS* makes it clear that the birth of cinephilia is indeed a momentous historical event, because it ushers in the revolutions of how time is experienced, which we are only now beginning to come to grips with, while showing just how crucial a role the cinema itself has had in all this, along with other, more directly technological or political factors. Instead, it is cinema's scheme of temporal regulation and time articulations that popularized the medium, and has kept it alive for over a century now. However, in this particular case, cinematic time is no longer either a matter of mastering time at the mechanical level or articulating it through narrative. Bertolucci's film knows all about "timeless time" and the "space of flows" of contemporary globalization, but by attending to the micro-levels of body, domestic space, city, cinema – and their interactions on that plane of immanence which are the loops of cinephilia time – *THE DREAMERS* can convey how timeless time feels, and how the space of flows affects us in our innermost being. Cinephilia in the current media context, as Bertolucci demonstrates, has shifted from *reliving* the moments – illustrated by Matthew, Théo and Isabelle mimicking memorable movie scenes for each other – to *reframing* them. Reframing is our task as spectators, and it means being able to hold together in a single representational space two different temporalities – here the cinematic time of 1968 and the cinephilia time of our collective memory of "May '68" – and of calling this framing, this holding together "love." Such is perhaps Bertolucci's

ultimate dream project: to make us love the cinema once more, in the age of television, the internet and all the other ways we can store time and represent history, by making us first love the love of cinema which his own generation called cinephilia.

Notes

1. There is a quote in Jean-Luc Godard's film *LE PETIT SOLDAT* (France: 1963) that says "photography is truth, and cinema is truth 24 frames a second."
2. *Chronos* is time as duration, passage, flow, flux. *Kairos* is time as event, appointment, juncture, opportunity. *Aion* is time as a very long period, an age, an eternity.
3. Gilbert Adair's *The Holy Innocents: A Romance* is a typically erudite homage to *THE STRANGE ONES/LES ENFANTS TERRIBLES* (France: Jean-Pierre Melville, writing credits: Jean Cocteau, 1950). From Anthony Allison, "Last Perversion in Paris." Review of *The Dreamers*. *Las Vegas Mercury*. 4 March 2004. 16 January 2005 <<http://www.las-vegasmercury.com/2004/MERC-Mar-04-Thu-2004/23346923.html>>.
4. Bernardo Bertolucci, Interview. *National Public Radio News*. 6 February 2004. 10 January 2005 <<http://www.npr.org/dmg/dmg.php?prgCode=DAY>>.
5. "Théo's instant transformation from armchair Maoist and domestic slob to ardent militant is glib, his visit to the Sorbonne a nod to a clichéd iconography rather than an accurate depiction of events, and money and food shortages figure only in the sense that the three are reduced to drinking papa's vintage Bordeaux." Vincendeau, Ginette. "The Dreamers." Review of *The Dreamers*. *Sight and Sound*. February 2004. 10 January 2005. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/2004_02/thedreamers.php>.
6. Kolker, Robert Phillip. *Bernardo Bertolucci*, London: BFI Books, 1985, p. 5.
7. Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960, p. 1.
8. Even though Bertolucci said in this interview (*Black Film*. 10 January 2005 <<http://www.blackfilm.com/20040130/features/bertolucci.shtml>>) that he "was there," he only meant it figuratively, for in May of 1968 he was shooting *PARTNER* (Italy, 1968) in Rome, Italy. He made this clear in "The Making of *The Dreamer*" (available on the DVD version).
9. Bertolucci Interview. *Cinema Confidential*. 6 February 2004. 10 January 2005 <<http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?id=0402061>>.
10. Vincendeau, Ginette. "The Dreamers." *Sight & Sound*. February 2004.
11. Absalom, Roger. *France: The May Events 1968*. London: Longman, 1971, p. 82.
12. Bertolucci Interview. *Black Film*.
13. Kolker, Robert Philip, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, p. 5.
14. Bertolucci interview. *Black Film*.
15. "On Subjectivity and Subjectivism." *Waking Life*. Site created and designed by Jimmy Hernandez. 10 January 2005 <<http://www.prism.gatech.edu/~gte484v/wakinglife/subjectivity.html>>.
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18. Idem.
19. Bertolucci interview. *Cinema Confidential*. 6 February 2004. 10 January 2005 <<http://www.cinecon.com/news.php?id=0402061>>.
20. Ebert, Roger. "The Dreamers." Review of *The Dreamers*. RogerEbert.com: Movie Reviews. 13 February 2004. 10 January 2005. <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040213/REVIEWS/402130302/1023>>.
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22. Domhoff, G.W. "The 'Purpose' of Dreams." *The Quantitative Study of Dreams*. 19 December 2004 <<http://psych.ucsc.edu/dreams/Library/purpose.html>>.
23. Kolker, Robert Philip, *Bernardo Bertolucci*, p. 1.
24. Idem, p. 64.
25. Ebert, Roger. "The Dreamers."
26. Bertolucci interview. *Cinema Confidential*.